

United States Senate

July 31, 2018

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The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable Michael O’Rielly
Commissioner
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable Brendan Carr
Commissioner
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel
Commissioner
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai and Commissioners O’Rielly, Carr, and Rosenworcel:

I write ahead of the vote the Federal Communications Commission (FCC or the “Commission”) will take at the August meeting regarding the recent Notice of Inquiry issued by the Commission and the “Connected Care Pilot Program” the notice proposes to establish. I believe strongly that everyone deserves access to quality health care they can afford, which is why I commend the Commission in its effort to invest more resources in telehealth. These investments could help communities—particularly in rural areas—improve care and eliminate barriers that prevent families from getting the health care they need.

Minnesota is a rural state and, like much of the country, there are disparities between the health of people who live in rural and urban areas. People in rural areas tend to have a greater need for health care services. Well over 40 percent of rural Minnesotans are over the age of 50. And people in rural communities are more likely than people in other areas to die from all of the top five causes of death in my state, including cancer, heart disease, and accidental injury.¹

Despite this need for care, there is a significant shortage of providers—while roughly half of the people in my state live in rural communities, only about one in every eight of our physicians practice there.² Health care workforce shortages—along with unreliable funding, lack of transportation, and other challenges—make it more difficult for people in rural areas to get the health care they need.

¹ Minnesota Office of Rural Health and Primary Care, “Snapshot of Health in Rural Minnesota 2017,” *Minnesota Department of Health* (2017) (Online at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/pubs/rhac/2017snapshot.pdf>)

² Minnesota Office of Rural Health and Primary Care, “Overview of the Physician Workforce 2017,” *Minnesota Department of Health* (October 2017) (Online at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/workforce/phy/2017pchartbook.pdf>)

Experts in Minnesota have determined that telehealth initiatives help increase access to services, particularly for mental health, enhance coordination among providers, and lead to earlier intervention and improved outcomes.³ And there is promising work already happening in communities across my state.

For example, professionals at Essentia Health have been using telehealth to monitor patients who are recovering from heart failure, leading to a readmission rate of only 2 percent, over 10 times below the national average.⁴ And the Arrowhead Telehealth Alliance—which serves a region that covers 23 percent of Minnesota, but contains only 6 percent of our residents—is stretching scarce mental health resources by using technology to integrate mental health and primary care.⁵ Finally, Minnesota VA hospitals in St. Cloud and Bemidji are using telehealth to help the 1 in 4 veterans who live in rural areas get care in their homes and avoid unnecessary trips to the hospital.⁶

As you consider the proposal to create the Connected Care Pilot Program, I welcome the opportunity to work with the Commission to support the expansion of broadband and telehealth services in Minnesota. This will allow health care leaders in Minnesota to continue their efforts to mitigate health disparities between rural and urban communities and ensure that every family, no matter where they live, can access the care they need.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to working with you to expand investment in broadband and support telehealth initiatives in Minnesota.

Sincerely,



U.S. Senator Tina Smith

³ Rural Health Advisory Committee, “Telemental Health in Rural Minnesota,” *Minnesota Department of Health* (July 2010) (Online at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/pubs/rhac/tmh.pdf>)

⁴ Bill Siwicki, “essential Health slashes readmissions with population health initiative, telehealth,” *Healthcare IT News* (March 2016) (Online at: <https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/essentia-health-slashes-readmissions-population-health-initiative-telehealth>)

⁵ Steven Ross Johnson, “Minnesota deploys telehealth to expand mental health access to rural areas,” *Modern Healthcare* (May 2017) (Online at: <http://www.modernhealthcare.com/article/20170527/MAGAZINE/170529922>).

⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “St. Cloud VA Health Care System,” *VA.gov*. (June 2018) (Online at: <https://www.stcloud.va.gov/services/>); Tribune News Service, “For rural veterans, new approaches to health care,” Bemidji Pioneer (August 2017) (Online at: <http://www.bemidjipioneer.com/news/4309359-rural-veterans-new-approaches-health-care>).



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

September 27, 2018

The Honorable Tina Smith
United States Senate
309 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Smith:

Thank you for your letter expressing support for the Commission's inquiry into creating the Connected Care Pilot Program and for telemedicine generally. As the son of two doctors in rural Kansas, I understand the critical role that broadband plays in providing patients in rural areas with high-quality health care services. And as Chairman, I've seen the potential of telemedicine firsthand, from a Veterans Affairs facility in rural Lecanto, Florida to Hermiston, Oregon, where local health care providers are making a real impact on rural communities.

As you note, broadband-enabled telehealth can provide access to health care services that may not otherwise be available to those in rural America—including those in Minnesota, where health care provider shortages and other challenges otherwise prevent families from getting the care they need. That is why the Commission is taking steps to support broadband connectivity for those communities with the goal of maximizing the benefits of telehealth for all Americans through enhanced digital access. In June, the Commission adopted a Report and Order that takes immediate action to increase funding for rural hospitals and health clinics by 43%, or \$171 million per year. This increase—along with future inflation adjustments and a mechanism to carry forward unused funding from previous years—will help ensure that rural health care providers get the connectivity they need to better serve patients for years to come.

On August 2, 2018, the Commission unanimously adopted a Notice of Inquiry, led by Commissioner Carr, which seeks public input on how the Commission can help advance the movement in telehealth towards connected care—high-tech care that can be delivered directly to patients regardless of where they are physically. Specifically, the Notice seeks comment on creating an experimental Connected Care Pilot Program to support the delivery of connected care telehealth services to low-income Americans. Reply comments are due in the coming weeks, and we will be sure to include your comments in the record of the proceeding and take them into account as we move forward.

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I look forward to reviewing the record that develops in response to the Notice, and to working with you and my colleagues to bridge this critical gap in the digital divide. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,


Ajit V. Pai

P.S. Senator, I really appreciate your inquiry and hope to collaborate with you. I've seen in so many rural communities and places like VA health facilities that telemedicine is a game-changer!